



(Top) Rescued books are dried out before being put into trucks for storage. (Near right) Baghdadi Jewish names list probably from the early 1940s. (Center) Title page of Eden BaGan published in Bigoriya. (Far right) Story of Joseph the Righteous in Baghdadi Judeo-Arabic.



ALL PHOTOS WERE TAKEN WITH A DIGITAL CAMERA AT LOW RESOLUTION

# SADDAM'S JEWISH ARCHIVES

In the basement of Iraqi intelligence headquarters, Torahs and books from a lost community are rescued from three feet of water.

## It all began with a tip

like the one that led the Americans to where Uday and Qusay Hussein were holed up in Mosul. Except that this was a tip about a rumored seventh-century Talmud in the basement of the Mukhabarat headquarters in Baghdad. The Mukhabarat was Saddam Hussein's feared secret service, and the tipster was the head of the Israel-Palestinian section of the Mukhabarat. The massive Mukhabarat headquarters in the heart of Baghdad was an early target of Allied precision bombing.

The Americans decided to investigate but were careful enough to initiate the investigation with a team searching for weapons of mass destruction (WMD). "Embedded" with the WMD team chosen

for the task was *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller who decided that since they would be looking for Jewish documents, they should take with them someone who knew something about Judaism. So she called Harold Rhode, an Orthodox Jew who was a policy analyst with the Office of the Secretary of Defense in the Pentagon. Rhode was already in Baghdad, speaks Arabic as well as Hebrew, and is knowledgeable about Islam as well as Judaism. He is a protégé of Bernard Lewis, who dedicated his most recent book, *The Crisis of Islam*, to Rhode.

When the WMD team, Miller and Rhode and the tipster, arrived at the Mukhabarat headquarters, looters were swarming through the building. "It was



(Left) The Writings, published in Venice in 1568. (Center) A tiq, a Torah scroll holder. (Right) Cover of Ain Yaakov, published in Slavita.

eerie,” says Rhode. “The building could have collapsed at any moment and there was a live 2,000-pound bomb which could have exploded at any time.”

The basement, which housed the Israel and “Jew” departments as well as a torture chamber, was flooded with three feet of water. The unexploded bomb had hit the building and the force of the impact had shattered the water pipes. “It smelled like putrid water,” recalls Rhode.

Wearing miner’s lights and anti-WMD suits to protect themselves from possible radioactivity, the team began their search. There were no WMDs but the first thing they found in the Israel section was a model of the Knesset in Jerusalem. Above a map on the wall that showed where the 39 Iraqi scuds landed

Rhode. “I had seen so many dastardly things in the country that I wasn’t surprised by what levels Saddam and his henchmen would stoop to humiliate and murder. Nothing was surprising—that was what was so amazing.”

Rhode quickly took charge of the rescue operation. The first task was simply to pump the water from the basement. For this, Rhode needed workers. And for this Rhode needed money. Rhode’s first call was to Ahmed Chalabi, the head of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), whom Rhode greatly admired and knew well from over a decade of working together. Chalabi, from a prominent Iraqi banking family, returned to Iraq at the end of the war, after living in exile for 45 years. Chalabi, a Shiite Muslim, is in turn a great admirer of the former Jewish community of Iraq, and he made the first contribution from his own funds to finance the draining of the Mukhabarat basement. Rhode then contacted people in the United States who led him to Lehman Brothers investment banker and philanthropist Harvey Krueger who rounded up and supplied the money needed to continue the operation.

When the water was drained out, the treasure trove could be assessed for the first time. One large area of the basement was devoted to documents about Israel. A separate long hall contained materials apparently confiscated from Iraqi synagogues. The variety of books and documents was bewildering. The situation was reminiscent of the Cairo Genizah, from which thousands of medieval documents were emptied in the late 19th century by Solomon Schechter, then of Cambridge University and later head of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York.

Except that these documents were in the basement

## THE SITUATION WAS REMINISCENT OF THE CAIRO GENIZAH, FROM WHICH THOUSANDS OF MEDIEVAL DOCUMENTS WERE EMPTIED IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

in Israel during the 1991 Gulf War a sign in Arabic asked, “Who is going to send off the 40th?” The team also found a Soviet photograph of Israel’s nuclear reactor at Dimona.

Across a hall from the Israel section was the Jew section. “Torah scrolls were just strewn all over the place. I could understand why they had the Israel section—but thousands of Jewish holy books? I was angry at the total lack of respect for Iraq’s Jewish heritage, all that is left of a dead community,” recalls



of Saddam Hussein's secret service headquarters. Imagine finding a Torah scroll in such a place!

No one on the team knew anything about how to save the soaked Torahs and books. Rhode called Israel for expert help but not before committing what he considers a sinful technical transgression, something sacrilegious. "I rolled out a Torah scroll on the ground in order to help it dry. My choice was to let it dry out, then roll it up in a scroll and hope that afterward it could be saved or to let it harden. I am still thinking about what I did." Drying the wooden Torah case, a *tiq*, used by Sephardic Jews, was easier.

The Mukhabarat headquarters also yielded a variety of other holy books, including a copy of the book of Numbers in Hebrew published in Jerusalem in 1972, a Megillat Esther of uncertain date, a Hagadah published in Baghdad and edited by the chief rabbi of Baghdad. The oldest book was the third section of the Hebrew Bible, the Writings or Ketuvim, containing books like Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Lamentations, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles. It was published in Venice in 1568.

Another oddity was a copy of *Pirke Avot*, or *Etbis of the Fathers*, published in Livorno, Italy, in 1928, with an interlinear commentary written in Baghdadi-Judeo Arabic but written with Hebrew letters.

A *luach*, a calendar with the lists of duties and prayers for each holy day, was printed in Baghdad in

1972 and the frontispiece was the ruler's portrait.

Apparently, Saddam confiscated entire synagogue libraries. There were thousands and thousands of books. In addition to books printed in Vienna and Livorno and Jerusalem, other books were printed in Izmir, Turkey and Vilna. Obviously the Iraqi Jewish community had wide contacts with Jewish communities all over the world. These items told the story of Iraqi Jews.

The story began in 721 B.C.E., when the Assyrians conquered Samaria, eventually deporting 27,290 of the cream of Israelite society to the Mesopotamia heartland, according to Chronicles. Then in 586 B.C.E., Nebuchadnezzar exiled thousands of Jews to Babylon. These Jews created a vibrant community that was one of the two main sources of Mishnaic and Talmudic learning and lore. "For close on four millennia the fortunes of the Jewish people, the growth of their religious beliefs, and the shaping of their culture were, in one way or another, inextricably linked with the 'land of the twin rivers,' now known as Iraq," wrote Nissim Rejwan, a Baghdad-born Jew and author of *The Jews of Iraq: 3,000 Years of History and Culture*.

When Baghdad was established in 762 C.E., Jews were among the first residents. They lived in a Jewish quarter and on the west bank of the city—in Al-Karkh, its commercial and industrial center. Baghdad

The team found a model of the Knesset in Jerusalem in the Israel section of the Mukhabarat building.



Above are water-logged books and archival documents before they are rescued. To the right are books and scrolls—including a Passover Haggadah (Bottom)—the team pulled out of the Mukhabarat basement.

quickly became a major trading and intellectual center in the Islamic world, in part because the ruling Islamic caliphs included Jews in the political, business and artistic life of the city. Some of the rulers even gave Jews autonomy over their own affairs; Jews were ruled by Jewish exilarchs who traced their roots back to King David.

The fortunes of Jews in Mesopotamia rose and fell throughout the centuries, but generally the community thrived, even after the invasion of Genghis Khan and later, Ottoman rule. The Jewish population swelled in the 15th and 16th centuries when large numbers of Sephardic Jews who had been expelled from Spain immigrated.

When the British entered Baghdad in 1917 there were 80,000 registered Jews out of a total population of 202,000. During the British Mandate, Jews served in parliament and a Jew was minister of finance. Conditions quickly deteriorated, however, when Iraq gained independence in 1932 and became a haven for Pan-Arab nationalists and attacks on Jews escalated. In 1941, about 130 Jews were tortured and murdered and 1,000 were injured by mobs incited by Prime Minister Rashid Ali, a Nazi sympathizer.

When Israel declared its independence in 1948, martial law was declared in Iraq. Being a “Zionist” constituted a crime—punishment was seven years in prison or, in some cases, death. The law was rigorously enforced; fines up to \$40,000 were imposed on wealthy Jews. During the first three years of the Jewish state, approximately 125,000 Iraqi Jews emigrated to Israel. They were forced to leave property behind, which of course was confiscated. By 1952, barely 6,000 remained in Iraq, living under difficult conditions and, for a time, were forbidden to leave the country. After the Six Day War arrests became more widespread and the number of Jews continued to dwindle—to about 2,500.

The Ba’ath party came into power in 1968 and the next year nine Jews accused of espionage were publicly hanged in the streets of Baghdad to the riotous

cheers of the populace. When Saddam Hussein took power in 1979, he continued to persecute Jews. In 1996 only 120 Jews were reported to be left. When the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society came to Baghdad after Saddam's fall, they found 34 Jews, mostly old and sick. They spoke of their "inherited fear." Other estimates go as high as 70.

The basement treasure trove that Saddam confiscated also included miscellaneous communal records from the 1920s through 1953—marriage records, lists of male Jewish residents, school records, financial records, applications for admission to the University. These may ultimately prove to be the most valuable documents in the Jewish collection. They reflect the nature and quality of Jewish life in the Baghdad community at the time.

Preserving all these documents will be a challenge. Initially they were simply taken out and left to dry in the hot sun. When Rhode made contact with conservators in the United States, he was told that they should be immediately frozen. Unfortunately, there were no freezers available. They were simply taken to



A rescued Torah scroll dries out in a Baghdad alley.

ish community. But the former Iraqi Jewish community is scattered all over—the United States, London, Israel, Turkey. In effect, there is no longer an Iraqi Jewish community.

**THE TREASURE TROVE THAT SADDAM CONFISCATED ALSO INCLUDED MISCELLANEOUS COMMUNAL RECORDS FROM THE 1920S THROUGH 1953—MARRIAGE RECORDS, LISTS OF MALE JEWISH RESIDENTS, SCHOOL RECORDS, FINANCIAL RECORDS, APPLICATIONS FOR ADMISSION TO THE UNIVERSITY. THESE MAY ULTIMATELY PROVE TO BE THE MOST VALUABLE DOCUMENTS IN THE JEWISH COLLECTION.**

INC headquarters where they were left to dry. They were placed in 27 aluminum trunks and stored in a freezer truck in Baghdad. In late August, they were flown to a restoration company in Fort Worth, Texas with the permission of the Iraqi Cultural Ministry.

What is to be done with the documents and books? The answer is unclear. Recently the American government has taken over the matter, but the negotiations and resolutions are in flux and hard information is difficult to obtain. Reportedly, the U.S. National Archives is preparing to send a team to Baghdad to assist in conservation. One of the trickiest questions is the ultimate disposition of the trove. To whom do they belong? Clearly, to the Iraqi Jew-

"Their final resting place is to be determined," says Rhode. "Wherever it goes, it is the historical legacy of 3,000 years of Iraqi Jewish community, the overwhelming majority of whose heirs are in Israel."

And where and how will they be studied? And who will provide the funds? There are no answers at this time. Perhaps the more interesting question is: What does this tell us about Saddam Hussein? What in the world was this stuff doing in Mukhabaret headquarters? Why were these documents so important to Saddam and his henchmen that they were confiscated and stored in this most sensitive location? All that seems clear is that it reflects Saddam's paranoia and the depth of his hatred for Jews and Zionists.—H.S. ●